Program Notes for VSO Concert – Mahler: Symphony No. 3 – May 29-30, 2026

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GUSTAV MAHLER (1860 to 1911)

Note: A shorter version of this biography appeared in the 2024-25 season.

Gustav Mahler wrote massive symphonies for massive orchestras; at the same time, he asked massive questions about life. Where do we come from? Where does our road take us? Will the meaning of life be revealed by death? Questions like these made him something of a symbol of the 20th century, an age plagued by doubts and anxieties. He is still very popular. The great German conductor Bruno Walter believed that each of Mahler's symphonies attempted to answer these questions.

Born in Kalischt, Bohemia (now in the Czech Republic) in 1860 to a Jewish family, Mahler began piano lessons at age six, entered the Vienna Conservatory at 15, and the University of Vienna at 18. He was a good pianist, but an even better conductor. In the early part of his career he conducted in a series of opera houses, building his reputation. He then moved on to more important posts, first with the Budapest Royal Opera and then in Hamburg. At 37, he became director of the Vienna Opera, at the time the most important musical position in the Austrian empire. Because antisemitism was rampant in Vienna, Mahler converted to Catholicism to secure this post. But he lamented that he was thrice homeless: as a Bohemian born in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout the world.

Mahler was not a nice man! A neurotic psyche and basic insecurity led to an austere and arrogant outer character. Convinced of his own superior morals and musical knowledge, musicians both respected and feared him. He had no time for personal relationships and his marriage to Alma Schindler Mahler ended because of his neglect. (Alma has a fascinating story of her own! I encourage you to look her up.)

Mahler's ten years with the Vienna Opera were a great success. He taught the public to love operas by Mozart, Beethoven, Gluck, and Wagner. But his fiery temperament and iron will created enemies and intrigues against him. He said, "Humanly I make every concession, artistically none!" The death of a daughter and discovery of a heart ailment left him grief-stricken. He resigned from the Vienna Opera at age 48 and moved to New York to take a position first with the Metropolitan Opera and then the Philharmonic Orchestra. His three years in New York were unhappy. His lack of tact was evident when he called the orchestra, "the true American orchestra—without talent and phlegmatic." He was already fatally ill and returned first to Paris and then Vienna where he died in 1911. Reputedly, his final word on his deathbed was "Mozart..."

Mahler's busy life as a conductor left him, in his own words, a part-time composer. His relatively small but mighty list of compositions include nine symphonies and an incomplete tenth. Mahler's interest in song, particularly Austrian popular song and dance, permeates all his works. In the spirit of Schubert and Schumann, he wrote song cycles, the pinnacle being *Das Lied von der Erde* (*The Song of the Earth*).

Mahler was the last in a line of great Viennese symphonists, from Haydn to Brahms. His monumental symphonies are marked by lyricism, long melody lines and rich harmonies. They are deeply personal and introspective works, exploring themes of life, death, fate, and the human experience. He was one of the great masters of orchestration, combining solo instruments with texture and counterpoint. His musical language strongly influenced composers such as Shostakovich, Bernstein, and Copland.

Aesthetically and technically, Mahler was a 19th-century Romantic, but also a child of his time. He wrote, "My music is, everywhere and always, only a sound of Nature." By Nature he meant life and death, earth and universe. More than 50 years ago, author Harold Schonberg wrote, "To make him a modern symbol is to misunderstand modernism and misunderstand Mahler."

A Primer on Mahler Symphonies

Mahler's nine completed symphonies transmuted the musical form into vast psychological, philosophical, and spiritual experiences. More than perhaps any composer since Beethoven, Mahler expanded both the expressive range and the physical scale of the symphony. His works encompass marches, folk songs, military bands, funeral processions, birdsong, dances, chorales, children's songs, existential despair, and visions of transcendence. Mahler famously declared that "a symphony must be like the world—it must embrace everything."

The sheer size of these works was unprecedented. Most Mahler symphonies last between 70 and 100 minutes; the Third Symphony is even longer. The orchestras are enormous, often requiring expanded brass and percussion sections, offstage musicians, vocal soloists, and both adult and children's choirs. Yet the scale is not merely a matter of volume or duration. Mahler enlarged the symphony emotionally and philosophically. Where earlier symphonies focused on abstract musical development; Mahler's became journeys through memory, nature, irony, tragedy, and redemption.

Each symphony inhabits its own world. The First ("Titan") evolves from rustic nature music to triumph. The Second ("Resurrection") confronts death and spiritual rebirth. The Third attempts to encompass all creation, from inanimate nature to Divine love. The Fourth presents heaven through the eyes of a child. The Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh form a darker, more instrumental trilogy, culminating in the tragic Sixth, often called his most devastating work. The Eighth ("Symphony of a Thousand") is one of the largest choral works ever composed. Finally, the Ninth and Das Lied von der Erde meditate on mortality and death with extraordinary emotional intimacy.

Mahler's motivation for writing such expansive works arose partly from the culture of late Romanticism. But it was also deeply personal. Mahler lived a life of profound contradictions: he was a Jewish-born composer working in antisemitic Vienna; a supreme conductor struggling for recognition as a composer; and a modern intellectual haunted by metaphysical questions. His symphonies became vehicles for wrestling with life's largest issues: the meaning of existence, the inevitability of death, humanity's relationship with nature, and the possibility of transcendence.

At the time, Mahler's music divided audiences sharply. Some listeners found the works overwhelming, excessively long, or emotionally extreme. After his death in 1911, his music fell out of fashion, especially when his works were banned by the Nazis because of his Jewish heritage. Yet

beginning in the mid-20th century, helped enormously by conductors such as Leonard Bernstein, Mahler's reputation rose dramatically.

Today Mahler's symphonies occupy the very centre of the orchestral repertoire. Major orchestras worldwide regularly perform complete Mahler cycles, and audiences often experience these works almost as spiritual or emotional pilgrimages. Modern listeners, perhaps more comfortable than earlier generations with emotional complexity and existential uncertainty, find that Mahler speaks directly to contemporary anxieties and aspirations. His symphonies now stand not merely as late Romantic monuments, but as among the greatest artistic achievements of modern civilization.

Symphony No. 3 – Mahler (1895-96)

Orchestration: *4 flutes (all = piccolo), 4 oboes (4th = English horn), 4 clarinets (3rd = bass clarinet, 4th = E-flat clarinet), E-flat clarinet, 4 bassoons (4th = contrabassoon), 8 horns, 4 trumpets, flügelhorn (offstage), 4 trombones, tuba, timpani (2 players), percussion (bass drum, chimes, cymbals, glockenspiel, rute, snare drum, suspended cymbals, tam-tam, tambourine, triangle), 2 harps, strings, women's choir, children's choir, and mezzo-soprano soloist.*

Symphony No. 3 attempts to encompass the whole of existence: nature, humanity, animals, angels, love, and ultimately the possibility of transcendence itself. At roughly one hundred minutes, it is among the longest symphonies ever written and requires large-scale performing forces. But its scale is more than just quantitative. Mahler himself described the work as constructing "a whole world." More than any of his other symphonies, the Third reveals Mahler as philosopher, mystic, dramatist, and orchestrator of cosmic ambition.

Mahler composed the Symphony principally during the summers of 1895 and 1896 while serving as director of the Hamburg State Opera. Like many of his major works, it emerged during periods of retreat to the Austrian countryside, especially at Steinbach am Attersee, where Mahler composed in a small hut overlooking the lake and mountains.

The original conception of the Symphony was explicitly programmatic. Mahler initially assigned titles to each movement, tracing an ascent through different levels of creation: (1) Summer Marches In / What the Rocks Tell Me, (2) What the Flowers in the Meadow Tell Me, (3) What the Animals in the Forest Tell Me, (4) What Man Tells Me, (5) What the Angels Tell Me, (6) What Love Tells Me. He considered an additional final movement called "What the Child Tells Me", also titled "Heavenly Life", but decided against it and used it instead as the last movement of Symphony No. 4. Mahler only shared the structure and content with friends, one of whom reported Mahler saying, "You can't imagine how it will sound!"

Mahler later withdrew these titles, fearing they would reduce the music to simplistic illustration; they remain invaluable clues to the Symphony's imaginative landscape. The work is not a conventional narrative but an immense progression from primordial matter toward spiritual love.

The premiere took place in 1902 under Mahler's direction at the Krefeld Music Festival. Records show that between 1902 and 1907 Mahler conducted the Symphony 15 times. Its reception was mixed but fascinated. Critics alternately hailed it as visionary or denounced it as monstrous excess.

Posterity, however, has been kinder. Today the Third is recognized as one of Mahler's supreme achievements and one of the great monuments of late Romantic symphonic writing.

The enormous orchestral forces consist of massive brass and percussion sections, alto soloist, women's choir, children's choir, expanded woodwinds and strings, and offstage instruments. Yet what astonishes is not merely the size but the precision of colour. Mahler can make the orchestra roar with apocalyptic force or reduce it to chamber-like delicacy. Mahler wrote to a close friend, "It's not really appropriate to call it a symphony, for it doesn't stick to the traditional form at all. But 'symphony' means to me building a world with all the resources of the available techniques."

The six movements of the work are grouped in two parts. The long first movement comprises Part I, while the other five movements comprise Part II. There is usually a long pause after the first movement. The final three are played without pause. The Symphony's progression is mirrored in its orchestration. Earthy brass dominate the opening movement. Delicate woodwinds and dance rhythms emerge in the middle movements. Human voice enters only in the second half. The finale reaches toward sustained spiritual radiance. The journey is both musical and evolutionary.

Movement I: Kräftig. Entschieden (*Strong and Decisive*)
This opening movement alone can last thirty-five minutes, longer than many complete symphonies. Mahler originally called it "Pan Awakes" and later "Summer Marches In." Notice the double meaning of *Pan*: it is both a Greek god and means *all*. The movement unfolds with a sonata-like structure, though stretched almost beyond recognition. A stark and brutal introductory fanfare stated by eight French horns is followed by a series of marches. The first, featuring the brass, is heavy and menacing. Mahler described this effect, "Over the introduction to this movement, there lies again that atmosphere of brooding summer midday heat; not a breath stirs, all life is suspended, and the sun-drenched air trembles and vibrates."

A second theme bursts in briefly, in a lighter and brighter major key played by winds and solo violin. It will return in full force later as a complement to the opening fanfare. The development section includes off-stage snare drums that provide a rhythmic passage, followed by the horn choir repeating the opening fanfare and the menacing opening march. The climax is thunderous and blazing; the score is marked *mit höchster Kraft* (with all possible strength). A tam-tam crash leads to jubilant brass fanfares supported by pounding timpani and brings the movement to its decisive conclusion.

Listen for the raw and primordial horn fanfare; the march rhythms that alternate between triumphant and grotesque; sudden contrasts between violence and lyricism; nature sounds emerging from military textures; and the recurring struggle between order and chaos. Mahler's ability to juxtapose rustic dances, funeral marches, heroic proclamations, bird calls, and violent outbursts produces the effect of creation itself grinding into motion.

Movement II: Tempo di Menuetto (*Tempo of a Minuet*)
After the titanic, exhausting to play and listen to first movement there is a long pause. Then Mahler offers a remarkably modest minuet. He dedicated this movement to flowers in the meadow—nature at its most graceful and delicate. The oboe begins with a delicate melody, followed by rich variations. Occasional stormy passages interrupt the refined texture of the minuet which always returns.

Listen for elegant but slightly old-fashioned dance rhythms; subtle rhythmic hesitations that prevent the music from becoming merely charming; transparent orchestration and delicate woodwind colours. Mahler constantly destabilizes the elegance by stretching phrases unexpectedly and with ambiguous harmonies. The movement is pastoral, but never naïve. Nature here is fragile and fleeting.

Movement III: Comodo. Scherzando (*Comfortable, Scherzo*)
The scherzo starts the transition from daylight to darkness. It depicts the animal world, though not in any anthropomorphic sense. This is nature alive with unpredictability and irony. The movement is based partly on Mahler's song "Ablösung im Sommer" (Relief in Summer) from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn.* One hears bird-like woodwind calls, rustic dance rhythms, abrupt mood swings, and humour tinged with menace. The feeling alternates between refined and earthy.

An intriguing moment arrives midway through a distant post horn solo played offstage. A post horn is a valveless, usually coiled brass or copper wind instrument with a cupped mouthpiece. It was used by mail coach drivers in the 18th and 19th centuries to signal arrival or departure. In the score, Mahler directs the passages be played "in the manner of a post horn", so it may be possible to use a similar instrument like a flügelhorn. Everything changes as the bustling scherzo suddenly dissolves into nostalgia and distance. The post horn melody floats as if from another world, full of memory and innocence.

Listen for the contrast between the bustle of earth and the sounds from a distance; the extraordinary stillness of the orchestral accompaniment; and Mahler's manipulation of sound. Few passages in Mahler are more haunting.

Movement IV: Sehr langsam. Misterioso. (*Very slowly, mysteriously*)
The last three movements of the Symphony are linked together. In this sparsely instrumented fourth movement, the human voice enters for the first time. A mezzo-soprano sings the words from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*: "O Mensch! Gib Acht!" ("O mankind! Take heed!"). This nocturnal and philosophical movement contemplates humanity, woe, and eternity. Themes from the opening movement are also woven in. Oboe glissandi that represent the cry of a night bird punctuate the movement, confirming that night has arrived.

Listen for the dark colour of the solo voice; low orchestral sonorities that create a rocking feeling; slow-moving harmonic tension; and the sense of suspended time. Unlike the extroverted first movement, this music barely seems to move physically. Instead, it deepens inward. Mahler creates one of his characteristic paradoxes: immense emotional intensity expressed through restraint.

Movement V: Lustig im Tempo und keck im Ausdruck (*Cheerful… jaunty*)
Without pause comes a complete transformation. The movement begins with a children's choir imitating bells, singing "bimm, bamm". Mahler directed that the "m" should be hummed to make the imitations sound realistic. An exuberant female choir joins the mezzo soprano soloist. The text comes again from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and depicts angels rejoicing. This movement functions almost as a rest before the vast finale. A slightly menacing interlude at the midpoint fades quickly and the movement ends cheerfully, just as it began.

The rocking feeling of the fourth movement recurs here. John Mangum, writing for the LA Phil comments, “This musical repetition underlines the philosophical bond that ties movements four and five together. Both approach the inter-relatedness of joy and death from different angles: joy transcends death and worldly suffering, and heavenly joy rewards the faithful.”

Listen for bells and bright orchestral colour; childlike rhythmic energy; call-and-response writing between choirs and soloist; and humour plus innocence. Mahler balances irony and sincerity so delicately that one often cannot distinguish them. The movement ends quietly, preparing the emotional space for the finale.

Movement VI: Langsam. Ruhevoll. Empfunden (*Slowly, tranquil*)
The finale is one of the longest and most exalted slow movements in symphonic literature. Mahler originally associated it with Divine love. The movement unfolds as a vast arch form: an opening hymn-like theme, intensifying climaxes, periods of repose, and a final ascent to heavenly glory.

Listen for the noble opening string melody, gradual accumulation of emotional power; Mahler’s extraordinary pacing; the brass chorales that emerge near the end; and the final climb to affirmation. The broad, luminous, seemingly endless ending is almost overwhelming. The powerful movement beautifully pulls together the threads of the previous five movements and weaves them into power and beauty.

The great conductor, Bruno Walter wrote, “In the last movement, words are stilled—for what language can utter heavenly love more powerfully and forcefully than music itself? The Adagio, with its broad, solemn melodic line, is, as a whole—and despite passages of burning pain—eloquent of comfort and grace. It is a single sound of heartfelt and exalted feelings, in which the whole giant structure finds its culmination.”

Reviews of the premiere included these words of praise about the final movement: “Perhaps the greatest Adagio written since Beethoven”, and “It rises to heights which situate this movement among the most sublime in all symphonic literature”. The premiere, conducted by Mahler, received twelve “curtain calls” and a 15-minute thunderous ovation.

What Makes It Great?

The greatness of the Third Symphony comes not merely from its scale but because of its synthesis. Mahler combined nature music and metaphysical inquiry, folk simplicity and contrapuntal sophistication, irony and sincerity, and finally, monumentality and intimacy. Despite its vastness, the work remains astonishingly cohesive. Its emotional range offers brutality, humour, nostalgia, terror, innocence, and ecstasy, all within a single architecture.

Mahler’s Third stands alongside Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony as a redefinition of what a symphony can encompass, and beside Anton Bruckner in scale and spiritual ambition. Yet, it is unmistakably modern in psychology and orchestral colour. For orchestras, it is both challenge and rite of passage. For audiences, it can feel less like attending a concert than undergoing an experience. In this Symphony one encounters not merely a composition, but an entire worldview. No work fulfills Mahler’s declaration that a symphony “must be like the world” than his Third Symphony.